

*Pacific Ocean, 22°S, 180°W, May 1, 1938*

## TRAMP STEAMER

Several weeks creeping north to Fiji, the point of my scheduled disembarkment. My rough calculations had us now east by northeast, dead on for Tonga, not more than a day ahead. The captain said two, maybe three, he would let me know. Other stops to offload cargo? No, straight into port at Nukualofa. Why the change of direction? Why so long? When would I get to Suva? No answer beyond a shrugging gesture that suggested he had made the decision and it was his alone. My plans would unfold accordingly or not at all. He shut the door and left me staring at it on deck.

Maybe it was the captain.

Caracas. Name of the ship and the port of its registry. It had the usual: a greasy hull, smoke blowing black as coal from the fire down below, the stench of coconut oil and kerosene that made the occasional passenger stay upwind of it and on deck as much as possible. Through the glass I could see charts and other navigation equipment strewn about a large table, empty coffee cups, a pistol.

Maybe it was the ship.

South American crew. Wandering the world. No other identities. Stained T-shirts and ragged pants or shorts. Always smoking on deck. Talking in a low hush as they carried out their duties, eyes averted to avoid contact unless I asked a question. Then only one would face me directly and say *lo siento*, we are no sure, please see *el capitán*.

Maybe it was the crew.

Maybe it was the baggage. Salt streaks on your trunk, haggard leather straps, antique red smeared by abundant seas, too many carriers. Maybe it was the cotton dress, luxuriating in its proximity to you, soaking you in color. That laugh from deep inside, bubbling up in a pack of chuckling demons. Lips emblazoned with the texture of fine wet silk. Your drink, clinking against the rail as the ship lurched on a short swell or two. The ring on your finger. That cigarette.

Maybe it was you.